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OPIUM, WHOLESALE, RESALE, AND FOR EXPORT: ON DICKENS AND CHINA
(PART TWO)

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Charles Dickens, Jr., in Hong Kong: 1860

In 1859, war flared up again, when Elgin's brother, Frederick Bruce, who had been appointed envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentary to China at the end of 1858, was defeated at the Peiho — the North river (25 June 1859), so barring his access to Peking. Elgin was sent in again with Anglo-French forces, including, perhaps, Charles Dickens. Peking was occupied, and the Emperor's Summer Palace burned. The result was the Conventions of Peking (24 October 1860) which, incidentally, added Kowloon, the tip of the mainland near Hong Kong island, to Hong Kong, and made it British. Bruce became till 1864 superintendent of British trade in China.[22]

How would Charles Dickens have found Hong Kong? In the 1840s, sailing there from London had taken four months. Government dispatches were sent overland across the isthmus of Suez, and they took three months. P & O ships, which took 35 days from Southampton to Ceylon, began extending a service to Hong Kong in 1854. The fifty-four day schedule divided into three: Hong Kong–Ceylon, Ceylon–Suez, Alexandria–Southampton and the cost for a "gentleman" was £185. Arthur Clennam, returning from China, whether in 1825 or 1855, has met the Meagleses in Egypt, having come overland from Suez to Alexandria. In 1850, when a steam service began from Hong Kong to Shanghai, the tea-run from Canton to London took 97 days. Dickens writes in a letter of 7 July 1857 of Albert Smith going from Marseilles to Hong Kong — "a hot and weary journey" — and the Pilgrim editors note that Smith left on 8 July and arrived in Hong Kong on 21 August (*Letters* 8: 559). Not until 1887 was there a steamship service across the Pacific from Hong Kong. Hong Kong, so isolated, did not develop as a place in which to settle — as opposed to arrive, attempt to get rich quick and then leave — until the 1860s. Its population gives interesting evidence: 20,000 in 1848, and 125,000 in 1865. The non-Chinese population was four thousand, and all the Europeans were concentrated in one area, the Victoria district, which, Milne notes, in *Life in China* (440) became a city in 1849: strengthening its colonial hold by gaining a cathedral three years after it had just gained a race-course in Happy Valley.

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In *Bleak House* chapter 17, Allan Woodcourt is due to go to China, and to India, as a surgeon on board ship, but returns after involvement in a shipwreck off the coast of India (chapter 35). Shipwrecks, like this imaginary one, were frequent: between 1850 and 1870, 16 P & O ships were wrecked or disabled in storms.[23] In 1859, the year before Charley Dickens's visit, *The Times* commented that

> Hong Kong is always connected with some fatal pestilence, some doubtful war or some discreditable internal squabble, so much so, that...the name of this noisy, bustling, quarrelsome, discontented little island may not inaptly be used as a euphonious synonym for a place not mentionable to ears polite. (quoted, Nigel Cameron 90)

Two articles in *All the Year Round*, "A Piece of China" and "Another Piece of China" (30 April 1859, 16–20 and 7 May 1859, 37–40) indicate how Hong Kong island, with its islands surrounding it, was cut off (to travel the hundred miles to Canton from Hong Kong meant an overnight stop on the steamer at Macau), and the Europeans the object of piracy. The discussion of Hong Kong in the heat is quite negative. When Charles Dickens the younger arrived in a Hong Kong, now governed by Sir Hercules Robinson, colonialism could be seen in its worst lights, both in terms of what it had not achieved in Hong Kong, and for what it had done in China. But with the acquisition of Kowloon at the very moment of his sojourn in China, there were signs of change towards a new, more permanent form of colonialism as Hong Kong became politically insulated from the mainland. Kowloon allowed it to secure its shipping safe from China and from pirates. In the 1860s, few businessmen entertained hopes of coming home rich men after six years in Hong Kong but there was a sense of greater ease of access to the colony from Europe from the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, an event which informs the background to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank began in 1864, alongside other commercial companies (Crisswell 201, G. R. Sayer, *Hong Kong 1862–1919* 1–19). The change, which Charles Dickens just missed, is indicated by an article in *All the Year Round* for 1866, "With Opium to Hong Kong" (16 June 1866, 537–40). It describes a voyage from Calcutta via Singapore to Hong Kong and pronounces Hong Kong "in its own way, as beautiful a port as Singapore" (539), reversing the judgement of the earlier piece in *All the Year Round*. There is favorable discussion of the sampans in the harbor, of the sedan chairs ready for the European traveler, and of the main street and the architecture of the English residents. The Peak is at this stage pronounced "cheerless and lonely" and Hong Kong, policed by Hindus, is described as a "nest of thieves" in contrast to the order prevalent in Canton. But the piece ends with a cheerful

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reference to the racecourse at Happy Valley. And the year following "With Opium to Hong Kong," the Peak began to be opened up as a place for European summer residence. Hong Kong ceases to threaten when it becomes a place that can be made intelligible for the Westerner.

Charles Dickens's experience in Hong Kong, which might have been thought of under the title "Great Expectations" (Pip goes to London, Charles Dickens goes to Hong Kong) and which seems to have been negative, came at the end of that older moment in Hong Kong and China's history. Yet its abortiveness implies a domestic image: the loss of a secure economic future for the individual in Britain at the end of the 1850s (Walsh 73–98, specifically 86–87). Kate Flint (x–xi) implies how Dickens at this time did not feel in control of his own life and how he was disturbed by events occurring beyond the domestic sphere: Flint refers in this connection to articles preoccupied with difficulties in the Far East. There are several articles in *All the Year Round* which deal with China, some informatively, at the period of the ending of Britain's second conflict. A sample would be: "The Foo-chow Daily News" (19 November 1859, 86–88), "Taking Pirate Junks" (2 June 1860, 418–21), "Chinese Ways of Warfare," (9 June 1860, 178–90), "The Paper Wall of China" (14 July 1860, 319–24) on Confucius and China's "defective and incomplete system of ethics" which is contrasted with Christianity; "The Coolie Trade in China" (28 July 1860, 365), "Ashing the Pilot" (14 August 1860, 403–4), where the eponymous dying pilot has "comical half English ways," "Chinese Fighting Men" (1 September 1860, 502–4) where "the Chinaman, like other Orientals, is born to obey"; "Chinamen Afloat" (10 November 1860, 116–20), "The Man for China" (15 December 1860, 221–23), "Chinamen's Dinners" (19 January 1861 355–57), "Flaws in China" (9 February 1861, 414–19), and "Chinese Slaves Adrift" (8 June 1861, 249–53).[24]

Some of these articles take up a hostile note, but their insistent presence suggests a fascination with China, which implies that the European loses a sense of any sure footing there, while the article on Chinese food, which brings out all of its difference from Western food, is warmly commendatory of the cuisine in spite of its local criticisms of Chinese practices. "Flaws in China" discusses in detail the Chinese peasant rebellion, the Taiping Rebellion, which won its first successes in Nanjing in 1853, and its leader Hong Xiuquan (1813–1864). It urges solidarity with the Taipings to "open up China" and to end "Chinese exclusiveness." It considers that the quasi-Christian Taiping revolution may have fit Britain's interests:

> the uprising of a national party in a manner Christianised and the conquest of Pekin by a Christian western nation — are intended to be the means by which Chinese exclusiveness is to be overcome, and

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> the long isolated nation received into the brotherhood of the human family. ...It does seem the wisest thing for us to make common cause with the "rebels" and so serve humanity while helping forward our own designs. Would this be the first time in history when England's designs served the whole human race? (418)

There is the accusation that the Chinese have been "conservative, stationary, fossilised, and have mummified themselves and all around them by their conceit and stagnant pride." They have been led by the Manchus, whom the article calls the Tartars, following Palmerston's usage, when he called them "Tartars, for Chinese they are not."[25] The article adds: "When our people entered Pekin they found the whole place in the most wonderfully ruinous condition." This, then, would justify the vandalism there. But no good, says the article, can be expected from Chinese people — no awareness of their situation — since "the Chinese prefer lies to truth" — a view frequently expressed in these pieces, especially in the one called "The Man for China" which gives Bowring-like authoritarian-sounding advice to Lord Elgin on how to treat the Chinese. It would not be advice Arthur Clennam could have given, perhaps, but it may be the logical form of colonization that someone following "the track of the times" would have to take with regard to China. The article on "Chinamen afloat" discusses the use that the Chinese have made of their coastline, and it reprises some of the criticisms of Chinese ships that were part of the satire of "The Chinese Junk." Notably, too, this article criticizes "Chinese daubs" of their ships — "not worth anything even as works of Chinese art" — but while the piece does everything to sideline the Chinese, there is an unmistakable tone of admiration there as well. The tone of "Flaws in China," as if relating to the return of Charles Dickens, with which event it coincided, suggests that there can be no future for trading in China (it does not contain any reference to Hong Kong). This negative tone may also account for the removal of reference to China in relation to Herbert Pocket's prospects, and making him less of a free-trade merchant. It takes away, too, from the certainties for a career which were implied in *Dombey and Son*. *Great Expectations* is uncertain about any form of career for Herbert Pocket without Pip's money: a letter of Dickens of 8 July 1861 (*Letters* 9: 437) speaks of his son's difficulty in getting a partner: "the matter...seems as slow a matter to adjust itself as ever I looked on at." Perhaps this uncertainty about the prospects of getting on in the "universal struggle" accounts for a certain conservatism or authoritarianism in the novel for an example of which Pip's sourness of comment over the Chatham prison riots of 1861 (259–60; bk. 2, ch. 13) is representative.[26]

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Chinese in London: The Mystery of Edwin Drood and Opium

An article in *All the Year Round* in 1866, "Lazarus, Lotus-Eating" (Parkinson 421–425), sets the tone for a yet further provocation provided by China, perhaps the most problematic, because most nearest home and most modern. The "Lazarus" of the title, named for the beggar in Luke 16, is "one of the poor wretched Chinamen who shiver and cower and whine at our street-corners, and are mean and dirty, squalid and contemptible, even beyond beggars generally" (421).

The narrator follows him from Cornhill in the City to Whitechapel, to New-court and Bluegate-fields and to an opium den run by Yahee, another, octogenarian Chinese whom the narrator says he has met three years previously. Malays, Lascars, Chinese and Filipinos are all involved here and the sense is of another London, a hybrid city. One of the Chinese is called Chow Chee John Potter "because he's been christened; but he's not right in his head, and his own country-people don't understand him" (424). Yahee is described as smoking opium all night and commencing "fantastic anecdotes and still more fantastic songs, the offspring of [his] morbidly excited brain," and so continuing till morning "and then to go out marketing for bits of fish and rice" (424). This multi-cultural London, co-existing parallel to the other, known London, gives signs, in this article, of having penetrated metropolitan London culture much more than in the days of the Great Exhibition ten years earlier. As *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) indicates that selling drugs in London could be profitable to the Veneerings (see Cotsell), the drug-trade reached both the British and the Chinese and helped construct the multi-cultural and subcultural London seen in the first chapter of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). No longer is it a question of the English going to China: the opium-drugged Chinese in London, at the center of empire shows what has been repressed and promoted within it. And for the English to be drugged in a way reminiscent of the power of opium in Chinese cities means that they have been brought under the power of the Orient. Dickens visited an opium den in Shadwell in the summer of 1869 and consulted Sir John Bowring on the subject.[27] The *London Society* (1868) had also sent a reporter to an opium den, and he commented that:

> of all carnal delights that over which opium rules as the presiding genius is most shrouded in secrecy. It is invested with a weird and fantastic interest (for which its Oriental origin is doubtless in some degree accountable), and there hovers about it a vague fascination, such as is felt towards ghostly legend and the lore of fairy land. (Jacobson 23–25)

But the heightening of the issue in London came at the moment when

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opium in China had lost its "romantic" quality as illegal; the disenchantment is complete.

Edwin Drood begins with John Jasper lying on a large bed alongside "a Chinaman, a Lascar and a haggard woman" and the woman refers to a rival establishment — "Jack Chinaman t'other side of the court." David Paroissien, who discusses the prevalence of opium in England in the nineteenth century, compares the image of the spike on the post at the end of the bed for impaling Turkish robbers, with another in *Little Dorrit* (31; bk. 1. ch. 3).[28] Perhaps the bed Clennam sleeps in, in the house infected unconsciously with Chinese associations, induces such Oriental fantasies of the subject being caught, transfixed. The woman in the opium den has "opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman. His form of cheek, eye and temple, and his colour, are repeated in her. Said Chinaman wrestles with one of his many Gods or Devils, perhaps"(2; ch. 1).

The confusion of gender perhaps may relate to the perceived femininity in the Chinese, already discussed, while the racial confusion (Chinese/English) touches on anxieties that run throughout Dickens's sense of China. Now, the co-presence of the Chinese in London, caught up with the very agent of what has oppressed China, the opium, indicates how non-"civilizing" imperial expansion was. The woman's mutterings are unintelligible, and so are those of the Chinese when Jasper pounces on him, and "seizing him with both hands by the throat, turns him violently on the bed. The Chinaman clutches the *aggressive* hands, resists, gasps and protests" (my emphasis). The aggression, also imperial, comes from hands as much caught by the mania of consumption of opium as those of the Chinese; the Chinese, however, though he resists and protests, is cowed, and Jasper pronounces his words "unintelligible" — but how else would a Chinese speaking in Chinese sound to English ears? The pleonasm suggests the desire to reduce a great civilization to a state which is incoherent to Western eyes — as the article "The Japanese at Home" in *All the Year Round* (31 May 1862) refers to Shanghai, the newly created colonial city, as "that disgusting anthill which is called a Chinese town" (272).[29] It is also the imperial desire of Jasper to debase, to be able to write off the Chinese as unintelligible in his own terms.

Edwin Drood is off out East at the beginning of the novel, with the "condescending" intention of "waking up Egypt a little" (55; ch. 8) — as Herbert Pocket and Pip had worked in Cairo. The opening of the Suez Canal was something to wake up Egypt, as China had been woken up by British imperialism. The presence of the Landless brother and sister from Ceylon, the casual reference to a Chinese Joss (96; ch. 11) and to the Emperor of China (121; ch. 14) are further signs of how the East has permeated this novel, and how its surfacing in London reverses

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the colonial progress out East. The Chinese smoking opium appears on Charles Collins's design for the original part-issue, a sign, perhaps that he would have more centrality than his stupefied place in the first chapter would imply.

The novel satirizes what it calls a "gunpowderous" philanthropy, which is usually interpreted as a gird at John Bright and his reactions to the controversy over Governor Eyre's violent treatment of a rebellion in Jamaica in 1865, and also John Stuart Mill.[30] According to the text, the philosophy of these philanthropists was

> you were to abolish military force, but you were first to bring all commanding officers who had done their duty, to trial by court-martial for that offence and shoot them. You were to abolish war, but were to make converts by making war upon them and charge them with loving war as the apple of their eye (45; ch. 6).

There is more in the same vein. The text attacks a cultural schizophrenia it locates in Utilitarian radicalism, identical to that already described in Bowring's case. But such a splitting of the subject through ideology, which parallels the apparent splitting of the subject in Jasper, and which may extend further into the text, is as nothing compared to the splitting of the subject in Dickens. His tendencies are also Bowring-like. His attitudes to China in the journalism he permitted to appear, and in his own writings, manifest similar contradictions, including the double standard whereby opium is a fact of life in China but a threat in London. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* may also address the mystery of Dickens in relation to China. Though, with the word "unintelligible," which implies mystery, the other is denied a logic of his own, the text gives hints that this complacency will turn back upon the English — and not least Dickens — in ironic form.

NOTES

[22] On the role of Bruce in this, see Dean Britten.

[23] See the discussion of "Dickens and Shipwreck" by William J. Palmer 49–100.

[24] The articles referred to are not assigned authors in Ella Ann Oppenlander, *Dickens's All the Year Round: Descriptive Index and Contributor List* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1984), which only manages to identify a quarter of the articles' authorship. I count over 60 articles on China in *AYR*.

[25] Quoted, Graham 40 (statement of 20 December 1860).

[26] See Tambling, *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (28).

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[27] See the discussion by Jacobson (21–31). For missionary work amongst the Lascars and other Asian figures in Shadwell, see Lindeborg (381–404).

[28] See Paroissien (2002) for the discussion of opium (309–320 and 322).

[29] Shanghai became a "treaty port" at the same time as the acquisition of Hong Kong. For Trollope on Chinese cities containing "unwinged ants," see Tambling, *Lost in America* (90).

[30] For details, see Tambling *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (170–73).

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